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AUTHOR Earle, Janice
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ABSTRACT

Maryland is one of the states which recently developed new requirements for high school graduation. A preliminary evaluation of these new state standards has raised a number of issues about graduation standards and their assessment. The Maryland State Department of Education examined statewide policies and guidelines for high schools between 1982 and 1985. There were indications that curriculum contents and graduation requirements were inconsistent around the state. The new guidelines called for increased credits in mathematics, fine arts, and practical arts, and for instruction in computer use, study skills, and critical thinking. Four minimum competency tests in reading, mathematics, writing, and citizenship were also required. Some general concerns about raising graduation standards involve increasing state power, changes in curriculum and staffing, and increasing inequities for disadvantaged or high risk students. Initial evaluation of Maryland's program, conducted by experienced facilitators, indicated that a longer period of time was needed for phasing in the requirements for ninth grade students and for Certificate of Merit applicants. Most schools also reported difficulty in defining the fine and practical arts requirements. (GDC)

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ASSESSING GRADUATION STANDARDS: IMPACT AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

BY
DR. JANICE EARLE

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ASSESSING GRADUATION STANDARDS: IMPACT AND FURTHER QUESTIONS

Introduction

Since the publication of A Nation At Risk and the myriad reports and studies that followed, most states have re-examined standards for public high schools. With over forty states having recently articulated new standards, there is a need for states to carefully evaluate both the intended and unintended effects of the changed standards on students and schools. The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to describe background information related to the changing state role in educational reform; (2) to describe the design of an initial assessment of one state's (Maryland) new graduation standards; and (3) to generate issues that need to be addressed in a long-term assessment of the new standards.

Background

The 1980's have been the decade of high school reform. In state after state, testing programs have been developed to determine whether students have achieved the desired competencies. In 19 states students must pass these tests in order to earn diplomas (Anderson and Phipho, 1984). When this is coupled with the new graduation standards in 41 states, the following outcomes seem probable: additional courses will be required for graduation, electives will be reduced; and curricular standards will be applied to individual courses.

Policy analysts (Kirst, 1984; Anderson and Phipho, 1984; Kaplan, 1984; and Doyle and Hartle, 1985) concur that these state actions will result in greater state control vis-a-vis the public schools. There are a number of reasons for

this shift. First, since the federal government began channeling funds to state education agencies in the late 1950s, state departments of education have become larger, more complex organizations with an increasingly expert staff. Similarly, state governments have become more professional, sophisticated, and interested in both the issues and funding of education. As a result, whereas states provided 39 percent of all educational revenues in 1963, they provided 49 percent of such revenues in 1983. During the same time period, local expenditures were reduced from 56 to 44 percent (NCES, 1984).

As states assumed greater funding responsibilities for education, attention turned increasingly to raising standards. Like Florida, California, and many others, Maryland began the process of examining public high schools before the national studies reported their findings. There is no question, however, that the educational reports of the early 1980s provided additional impetus and support for the direction that examination was taking.

High School Reform in Maryland

Between June 1982 and June 1985, the Maryland State Department of Education conducted a comprehensive examination of the policies, programs, and standards for the state's public high schools. This examination was motivated by a number of concerns about the quality of the state's high school programs. Documentation showed that SAT scores had declined and the curriculum in many school systems had gotten too diffuse. The "integrity" of the single state diploma was called into question as several local school systems raised graduation standards beyond the state minimum required. School-based administrators were troubled by lack of statewide policy in areas such as attendance, grading and reporting, and transfer of students. Finally,

statewide policies and guidelines for high schools had not been examined for twenty years.

As a result of Maryland's examination, current ninth grade students must fulfill new requirements adopted by the State Board. Students are now required to take an additional credit in mathematics (a total of 3). Students will also be required to earn one credit in both fine and practical arts. The state did not raise the total number of credits required to graduate (it remains at 20) but the number of specified credits has been raised from 12 to 15. In addition, students must earn at least four credits after the completion of grade eleven, ensuring a fuller senior year program. There are statements in the new state bylaw that require students to receive instruction in computer use, study skills, and critical thinking. State guidelines in all subject areas required for graduation will be forthcoming.

Special student recognition is addressed through the opportunity for students to earn a Certificate of Merit. In order to earn this certificate, students must take two additional specified credits (in science and foreign language), earn at least twelve credits in courses characterized as "advanced" by the local school system, and maintain an overall grade point average of 2.6 on a 4.0 scale throughout the high school years.

In addition, students in the class of 1987 must pass all four of the state's competency tests (in reading, mathematics, writing, and citizenship) in order to graduate.

Finally, the state's study considered other critical issues related to high schools such as students services, student activities, instruction, school administration, and school climate. Statewide guidelines in all these areas will also be forthcoming.

Issues Related to Evaluating High School Reform

In assessing the impact increased graduation standards are likely to have on high school students, researchers have identified the following:

1. There is little evidence to suggest that increased credits translates into increased learning. (ASCD, 1985; Goodwin and Muraskin, 1985)

2. Because the reforms have been enacted by states, it follows that their implementation will result in increased state power such as additional state regulation, administration, monitoring, and accountability. (Doyle and Hartle, 1985; Kirst, 1984)

3. The dropout rate has increased from 22.8% in 1972 to 27.1% in 1982. (U.S. Department of Education). The new standards increase the emphasis on academic achievement. Thus, it seems likely that the dropout rate will increase unless particular care is taken to assure appropriate programs for "at risk" students. (Cusick, 1983; McDill, et.al., 1985; Goodwin and Muraskin, 1985; ASCD, 1985)

4. The new standards may indeed increase achievement among those students who are academically able, but who have been increasingly engaged in less academic courses. (ASCD, 1985)

5. The new standards will affect extracurricular activities and students who leave school for jobs or work study programs. (Goodwin and Muraskin, 1985; Sedlak, et.al., 1986)

6. The new standards will have an impact on staffing patterns and the curriculum offered in the high schools. (Doyle and Hartle, 1985; ASCD, 1985; Goodwin and Muraskin, 1985; Pace, 1985)

7. High school completion rates, enrollment in college preparatory programs, and success rates on competency tests are lower for disadvantaged minority students. Particular care must be taken to ensure that the new standards do not cause greater inequities based on race and social class. (McDill, et.al., 1985; ASCD, 1985; Doyle and Hartle, 1985; Sedlak, et.al., 1986)

Data Collection and Conclusions

In designing an evaluation plan to assess both the short and long-term impact of the new standards, the Maryland State Department of Education worked cooperatively with the policy analysis unit of Research for Better Schools in Philadelphia. In developing the plan, it was clear that two different sets of questions needed addressing. The first concerned a series of questions related to how local school systems were actually implementing the new requirements for ninth grade students. Issues included how to inform local school systems of the new requirements, how to obtain information from local school systems regarding their processes and procedures, and an identification of local problems and concerns.

In considering effects of the standards over time, the Department wanted to phrase some questions regarding impact on students and schools. In order to gain this information, it will be necessary to frame questions regarding how the new standards affect equity, dropout rates, the curriculum, and school organization.

Immediate Impact

First, a series of questions were posed regarding how local school systems were implementing the new standards. In order to have access to this information, a linkage between the state and the LEAs needed to be established. In order to establish this linkage, both existing contact people and new contact people were identified.

The existing people used by the State Department to assist in the implementation of the new standards were the facilitators who had been involved in the implementation of Project Basic, the state's competency testing program. These individuals, (24 in all, one for each local school system) were employees of the Department, but each was assigned to a local school system, in order to assist that system with the implementation of the testing program. When the State Board passed the new graduation standards, the facilitators took on the added responsibility of acting as the liaison between the Department and the local school systems for this function as well. This process had the following advantages:

- The facilitators were well known in the local school systems; indeed some had been working with the system for several years.
- Central office staff in the local school systems were used to relying on the facilitators as liaisons with the Department.

In addition to the facilitators, each local school system was requested to designate one individual as the staff person for implementation of the graduation requirements. All the local school systems did so. This individual was responsible for developing processes for implementation and for providing the facilitators with the information they needed to report back to the state.

Initial questions posed by the Department through the facilitators centered on how local school systems were identifying courses for the Certificate of Merit, and in fine and practical arts. Questions were asked regarding the process used, the courses identified, and the criteria applied. Additional questions were posed regarding how students, staff, and parents were being informed of the new requirements.

Second, there was a field component to the evaluation design. Throughout the three years of the Department's examination, five field site schools were used. Interviews were conducted systematically with administrators, teachers and students in those schools in order to test the probable impact of the proposed recommendations. These schools were selected from a list nominated by local superintendents, and included schools of varying size, student population, and geographical location. In order to determine initial impact of the new requirements, an interview schedule and a series of interview questions for teachers, administrators, and students was developed to be used in each field site school.

Finally, it was deemed desirable to obtain baseline data on the high school program of a selected number of students. It was decided that this set could then be compared with student programs in four years hence, when the first set of students impacted by the requirements was ready to graduate. In this way, it would be possible to determine whether desirable program changes had taken place.

Data collection will not be completed until late spring of 1986. Therefore, only the most preliminary information is currently available. However, based on initial material collected by the state from local school systems, the following tentative findings are offered.

First, initial implementation was hampered by the timeline that the State Board set for local school district compliance. The Board did not take final action on the new graduation requirements until June 1985. Because they had been under discussion for a year and a half, the Board did not feel that a long phase-in period was necessary. They directed local school districts to begin implementation for students who were ninth graders during the school year 1985-86. This meant that local school districts had only two months in which to have the requirements in place for ninth grade students. In retrospect, this was not enough time, and local school districts were unanimous in feeling that they did not have enough time to adequately implement. In practice, this meant that local districts made decisions based on immediate feasibility with the notion that the decisions might be changed later. For example, many local school districts identified those courses designated for gifted students as those courses that would be used to fulfill Certificate of Merit requirements. Thus, courses identified to fulfill the Certificate's requirements were largely academic. The State Board's intention in creating the Certificate was to make it more inclusive -- to permit a wide range of courses to qualify and to make it a standard that many high school students would strive to achieve.

Second, it was clear on a first analysis, that most local districts were having difficulty in the first attempts to identify courses that fulfilled the new fine and practical arts requirements. Given the diversity of the local districts, and of the curricular offerings in each school system, this was not surprising. The concern of the staff in the State Education Department was that some of the identified courses did not meet criteria suggested by the State Board.

Long-Term Impact

In creating a long-term set of questions that will assist the Department in assessing the impact of the reform efforts on schools and students, a number of factors need to be carefully considered.

First, there is a series of questions that revolve around equity issues. For example, it is apparent from our initial examination (and it is no surprise) that the curricular offerings vary considerably according to the wealth and size of the local school system. These differences increasingly stand out when new standards are articulated. The opportunity to earn the twelve hours in "advanced" courses for the Certificate of Merit poses problems for small school systems. In large systems, entire class sections may be designated as "advanced." In smaller systems, there may be only a few students in a class who wish to take it for "advanced" credit. This creates both record-keeping and curricular dilemnas.

In addition, there are questions that relate to the differential impact of the standards on specific populations. If the Department should find that a disproportionate number of white students earn the Certificate of Merit, or that a disproportionate number of Black students are found taking three years of general mathematics courses, then these issues will need to be documented, and the State Board may wish to address them.

If an increase in the rate of students who don't complete high school is documented, and if the non-completion rate can be traced to the increased standards, then that too, is a matter for policymakers to take into account.

Second, there are questions that need to be addressed related to changes in school organization. Have the new standards caused changes in the configurations of the curriculum? Obviously, if all students are required to take additional specified credits (fine arts, practical arts, and mathematics)

they will not be taking something else. What changes in staffing patterns will this cause? Will there be changes in the length of the school day? In the number of periods in the school day? There is evidence from the Maryland data that because of the new requirements, four additional school systems have placed their high schools on a seven-period rather than a six-period day. In the remaining five systems still on a six-period day, a change to a seven-period day is under discussion.

In addition, a series of questions must be asked about the impact of the new requirements on activities programs, and work-study/experiential learning programs. Because the new requirements are academic in tone, they may have negative effects on programs that are not academic in nature.

Conclusion

The effects of the new standards will not be clear unless states are willing to vigorously evaluate their recent enactments. This calls for a new state role in those states, like Maryland, which have traditionally been reluctant to monitor and assess the activities of local school districts. If the standards are to have their intended effects, then states must take on some monitoring activities. The state of the art of statewide data will need to become more sophisticated. Just as states took the initiative in defining new standards, so now must states carefully examine results.

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